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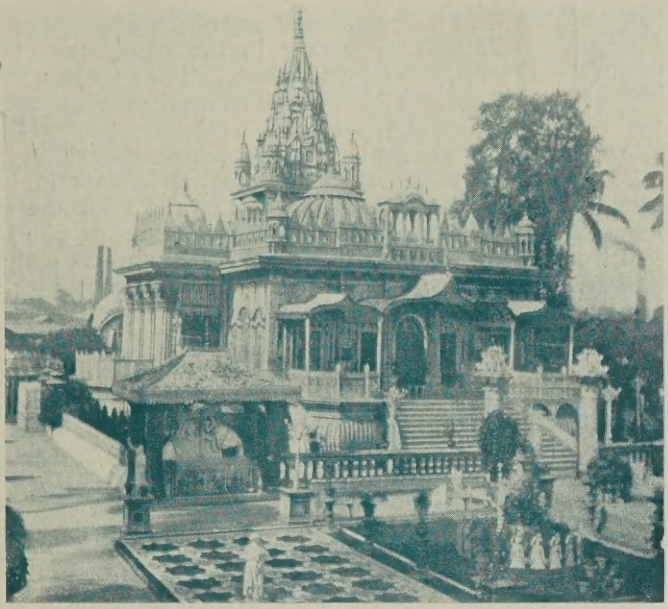


WITHIN THE WALLS

Y.W.C.A.

WITHIN THE WALLS

"NO! I am not interested in politics," said a girl when asked if she had read any of the numerous articles on India appearing in the newspapers to-day. "But," was the answer, "India doesn't mean politics—it means *people,* three hundred and thirty millions of people!"

Now, people are always interesting, the wide world over, but some of us confess to-day to a very special interest in India's millions, for we cannot forget that among them are the sisters and daughters and wives of those brave Indian troops who fought and fell alongside of our men in France in the darkest early days of the war. We wish we knew more of these unknown girls and women who have given so much. What are they like, and what of their homes and children?

India's daughters

A letter recently written home by an Englishwoman in Bombay gives us a brief picture:

> "Before closing," she says, "I want you to look up with me and see a wee figure in red trousers and bright green 'Kurta' or vest, with nose ring, many bangles, and ear rings, peeping over a balcony in this street. There is little response to my 'Salaam,' and it sets me wondering. Away in the dark, airless rooms above this balcony live Indian women, and the time will soon come when this wee person herself will be married and give up the little liberty which enables her now to get a glimpse of the outside world. Have we anything to give to such as she?"

This "wee person" is typical of the forty millions of women in India of the Hindu faith, who are limited by their religion to a life "behind the curtain," for to venture into the sight of men is to risk losing their virtue, so they are taught. We, in our happy home-life in the West, can never picture all that this means. Married (or betrothed) in infancy, a girl in India leaves her own home and enters that of her husband when she is about twelve. At a time when most girls of the Western world are learning lessons at school, she, a mere child herself, has often a child of her own to bring up. If she has a son she is happy, but though the relationship between mother and son is beautiful, she has little to give him, for her mind is clouded with superstition, and her ignorance is often profound. She can neither read nor write, nor has she been trained in house-craft of any kind, and the home which she shares with many relatives is, too often, airless and dirty and disordered. But her boy will go to school, perhaps in time to college, and may even finish his education in the West. He may

know the highest intellectual life, but when he brings his young wife to his mother's home he will live in the lowest intellectual surroundings. Into a large part of his life neither mother nor wife will be able to enter, for the women of his household have had no education—not because they are incapable of learning, but because they are women.

Heavy Burdens

Heaviest of all the burdens on these most burdened women is that of caste. Go where you will in India you cannot escape from this system of dividing the people into water-tight compart-

Hindu Woman and Children.

ments, from the high caste Brahman, devoted to the services of religion, to the lowest caste Pariah. It is a religious requirement which enters into every act of life—eating, drinking, marriage, and death. Caste is the enemy of progress everywhere, but on women especially it imposes the most pitiful tyranny, and one of the greatest problems which confronts British rule in India is the gradual building up of a nationhood which unites, in the place of a castehood which separates.

Though the iron doors of caste do not imprison the Mohammedans as they do the Hindus, and though their women are not always subject to "purdah," yet the lives of the latter are restricted in every direction, and this not in spite of, but because of their religion, which discourages the education of women everywhere.

Bringing Milk to a Y.W.C.A. Camp.

Shut in on every side, denied the opportunity of self-development, unable to take any share in the life of the great world all around, without friends and books, often a prey to ill-health, the women of that great country—loving and gentle and devoted, as so many of them are—seem to belong to a different world from the liberty-loving, hard-working, merry girls of Great Britain, fellow-citizens of the same Empire.

But although the vast multitudes of Indian women are unable to read or write, there has lately arisen, partly through the devoted work of missionaries and partly through contact with the West, a desire to see better and more numerous schools established for girls. In the majority of cases, however, the school days are cut short by the custom of very early marriages, and the little girl of ten or eleven leaves school just when she is able to read and write, arts which, for lack of practice, she is apt to lose before many years are past. However, when these girls have daughters of their own, they will send them to school, and take the greatest interest in their lessons, and little by little the cause of education will spread.

In those cases where an enlightened father has permitted his daughter to have a higher education, Indian girls have given brilliant proof of their capabilities. In 1914 there were 2,000 girls training to be teachers, 250 were in medical schools, and about the

same number in art colleges. Women who have graduated hold positions of great responsibility, and their work will open the door for many others of their fellow-country women.

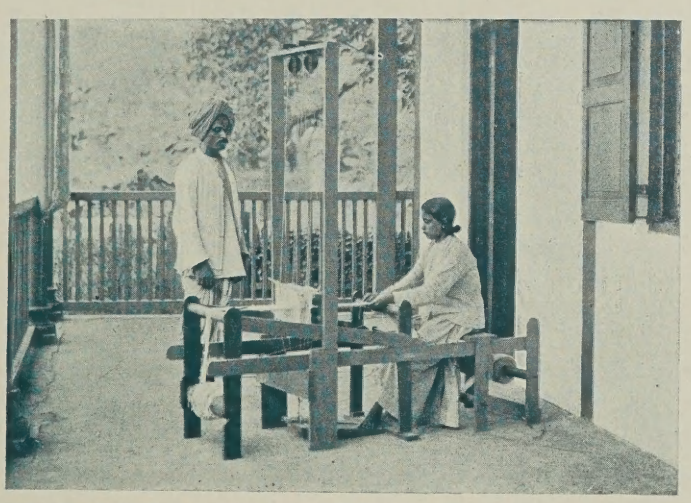
The real freedom

But women in India will never be free until the Christian ideal of marriage prevails. Many of the advanced Hindu sects are realising that their religion tends to degrade the position of women, and are trying to incorporate in their own teaching some of the teaching of Christianity on this subject. We in the West know well that it is only CHRIST Himself, Who has made us free, Who can meet the deepest needs of the East, and that is why the Young Women's Christian Association of this country and of America has sent some of its best helpers to supplement the work of the missionary societies on behalf of the women and girls of India.

The Y.W.C.A. in India

The Association goes with a message of light and cheer to the girls of that vast country—whether they be Indian born or Anglo-Indians, *i.e.*, of mixed parentage, or English and other European girls far from home.

For the latter the Y.W.C.A. has built beautiful Holiday Homes in the hills, where girls who have been working for months in the terribly hot plains are able to get an invigorating holiday. In Great Britain a holiday-place can be found within one or two hours' journey of any great city, but in India girls often have to travel forty-eight hours before they can reach a cooler atmosphere. If it were not for the Association Homes, and their carefully adjusted charges, many girls would get no holiday at all.



A blind Indian Girl being taught to weave.

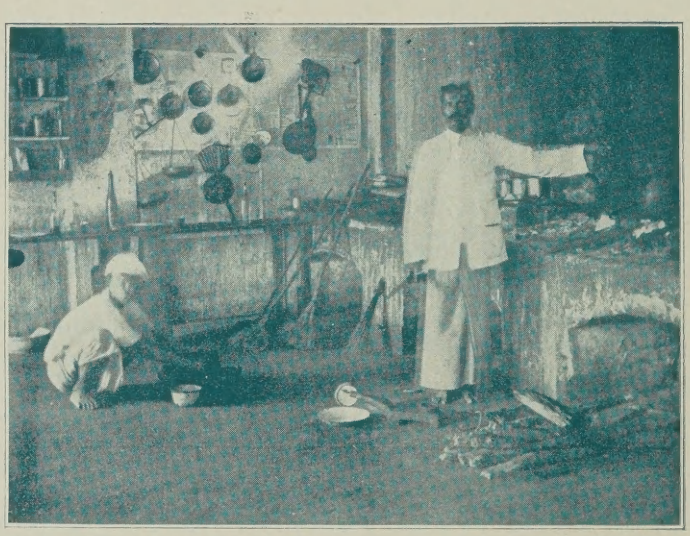
In many of the great cities—*e.g.*, Bombay, Calcutta, Lahore, Madras, etc., the Association owns beautiful buildings, with hostels and clubs for European girls, where, under the same roof, are to be found teachers, nurses, stenographers, telephone operators, and generally some stray visitors on their way up country.

In addition to its general work, the Association in India has its special war work just now. The Bombay club is thronged with Army nurses, and Blue Triangle clubs and hostels for nurses have sprung up in Mesopotamia, at Basra, Amara, and Baghdad.

A considerable portion of the European community in India is made up of Anglo-Indians. In many ways the position of Anglo-Indian girls is difficult. They belong to neither of the two races, and are apt to feel themselves looked down upon by both Indian and British. They can be, and often are, an invaluable help in bridging the gulf between the two. They do not find the climate so trying as do the British, and as they are generally very good at languages, there are many posts they can fill. But, like many of us at home, the Anglo-Indian girl avoids responsibility whenever she can, and she needs all the help the Association can give her in developing a strong all-round life. Clubs and Camps and Conferences have proved very successful, and the Girl Guide Movement is popular among the younger girls.

Indian girl students

Perhaps the most interesting work in which the Y.W.C.A. is engaged is that among Indian girl-students. Government education is entirely secular, and provides neither home life nor social opportunities for the student. The Hostels provided by the



A Y.W.C.A. Kitchen, Colombo

An Indian Student with a Class of Village Women.

Association for Indian and Anglo-Indian girls give them just the home life and "mothering" they need during their hard years of study. In many cases students have come very long distances to college, and but for the friends they have found in the Association's Homes would have been very forlorn and home-sick in the strangeness of their new surroundings. Many of them, having learned in the Hostel what the religion of Christ really is, have become His disciples, and will carry the good news of His love to the dark heathen cities from which they came. It is never easy to follow Christ. To do so in India often means separation, loneliness, and contempt, and sometimes active persecution, for the teaching of Christ cuts at the very root of the religious conventions of the country.

"What phase in Christ's life would you *stress* if you were writing about Him?" asked the teacher of an Association Bible Class in Bombay recently of a high-caste girl. Venubai Kalkan, holding her proud Brahmin head high, though her eyes were filled with tears, answered, "That He kept no caste!"

Perhaps we need to have lived ourselves in a country where caste is supreme to understand the beauty and the pathos of that story. We can, however, appreciate the courage of a girl who is willing to lay aside all the privileges conferred by caste to follow the One Who "kept no caste." Her courage is equalled daily by many girls of weak physique, with long centuries of tradition against them, who quietly face opposition and persecution and separation from those they love, for the sake of their new faith. The Association is proud to be able to help these girls in their many difficulties. It can help to give them a wider and broader outlook

on life, can bring them into contact with other movements, can give them some idea of social service, and, above all, can train them as future leaders. For it is not the British residents, nor the Anglo-Indians, but it is these Indian women, who, when taught, will bring their country

Into that state
Where the mind is without fear and the head held high
Where knowledge is free.

East and West can meet

Every movement which strengthens the bond between the women of the Homeland and those of India is well worth while, and of all the links that of the Y.W.C.A. may be the most far-reaching. The Queen herself, with characteristic sympathy, was quick to realise this, and on her last visit to India for the Durbar at Delhi, visited and inspected the Association buildings at Calcutta. The Queen's visit to India made an immense impression. At Delhi a deputation of Indian ladies presented her with an address of gentle homage and a beautiful jewel in memory of her Coronation. At this first meeting between an English Queen and Indian ladies in their own land, the Queen—herself a home-maker—spoke of her wishes for the happiness of all "within the walls," and of the evolution slowly, but surely, taking place among the inmates of the purdah. "When I wear the jewel you have given me," she said, "though thousands of miles of land and sea separate us, my thoughts will fly to the homes of India, and bring again and again to mind this happy meeting, and recall the love your tender hearts have given me."

That meeting was symbolic of the understanding and sympathy which can unite the women of East and West. We who have taken such great gifts of men and wealth from India in the hour of our need must give our best in return. The Association can be our medium, co-operating as it does with the Government and the missionary societies and all the agencies working for the uplift of India's women. Many more workers are needed, many new centres must be opened. By prayer and gifts and service let us strengthen the Association in its work, till not one city in that vast land is without its branch, as a centre of light and joy and healing in the midst of the evil and darkness around.

In the last four years many brave lives have been laid down that the women of England might keep their freedom. Could we show our gratitude in any better way than by helping to make other women free?

WILL YOU HELP?

For further particulars write to the Overseas Secretary, Y.W.C.A., 26, George Street, Hanover Square, London, W.1.